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June 16, 2020

Mr. David Gerstenfeld  
Interim Director  
Oregon Employment Department  
875 Union Street, NE  
Salem, OR 97311

Dear Mr. Gerstenfeld,

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused economic hardship for many Oregonians. We share a common commitment to ensuring those facing hardships receive the help they need. The State of Oregon Employment Department's (OED) delay in assisting the more than 486,700 Oregonians who were forced to file unemployment claims since March 15, 2020, has left many Oregonians in dire straits. I strongly urge you to take immediate steps to address the urgent needs of these Oregonians.

So far this year, my staff of caseworkers have worked over 1,100 cases for Oregonians in the 2nd Congressional District. Approximately one-third of these cases were interactions with constituents who had not received their Oregon owed unemployment benefits. Troublingly, many of these individuals have shared that my office is the only place they have been able to talk to someone on the phone about their inability to receive the assistance they are due – despite repeated phone calls to OED. These constituents include unemployed veterans who have waited more than ten weeks for the state to provide their unemployment benefits, single mothers whose checking accounts are overdrawn from trying to feed their children, and young people who just bought their first house and are facing foreclosure.

In March, Congress acted to bolster and expand assistance to Americans through the CARES Act, which included the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program. The PUA program provides unemployment benefits to those individuals not eligible for existing state programs and who are unable to work due to reasons related to COVID-19. The program also provided an additional \$600 weekly supplement payment in addition to base benefits. It is my understanding that most Oregonians who qualify for this assistance have yet to receive these benefits.

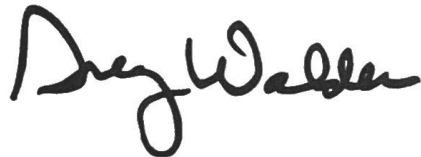
Even though there has been a vast increase in staff at the OED, thousands of Oregonians continue to wait for PUA benefits. While the influx of claims due to the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, they were not unanticipated effects of closing so much of our economy. As you work to address the backlog of claims, I request an update on the number of unemployment benefits processed, including the PUA claims that OED failed to include in their claim's

dashboard. Additionally, what is OED doing to turn out the PUA benefits to Oregonians, and when do you expect those benefits to be distributed?

The ongoing delays in getting this important assistance to Oregonians is made worse by more than a decade of failure to act and modernize the state's unemployment system. As you are aware, in 2009 OED received \$85.6 million in funding under the federal Unemployment Insurance Modernization Act. As of October 2019, \$81.7 million remained unspent. Such a delay is troubling, and the new projections that the upgrades will not be complete until 2025 is unsatisfactory. I urge you to expedite the effort to ensure that modern systems and infrastructure are in place to assist Oregonians in a timely manner both now and into the future.

Efforts taken to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have put immense strain on our local economies and the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Oregonians. Our unemployment system is an important safety net in difficult times, and Oregonians are counting on those benefits they earned. I look forward to your prompt response to my questions and swift action to get assistance to those in need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Greg Walden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Greg" and last name "Walden" clearly distinguishable.

Greg Walden  
Oregon's 2<sup>nd</sup> District  
U.S. Representative